The Podcast Review and Reviewing Born-Digital Scholarly Works

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The purpose of the review in our modern academic life is manifold. Reviews (book reviews specifically) inform us of newly published works that might be useful to active scholars plowing similar ground or those who might just have a cursory interest in a topic. Some writers have traced the review of books to Athens in 140 BCE, while others have anointed Photius of Constantinople in the Ninth Century CE as the first celebrated book reviewer with his tome on the contents of his personal library, The Bibliotheca. The review has been criticized as merely an opportunity for authors and publishers to promote their works, or worse, an opportunity for a reviewer to give voice to a secret (or not so secret) grudge publicly. There is, however, a function of the review that has become an important resource in modern academia—evaluation and contextualization. Reviews serve an important evaluative measure for tenure, promotion, and award committees. Multiple reviews can serve as a cross section of opinion about the merit and standing of any work, book or otherwise. This brings me to the review I think is missing (or rare, really) in academic circles, the podcast review.

Podcast reviews exist in popular media publications, in the way a video game, film, or app for a mobile device might get reviewed. If we take iTunes as the first mass distributor of podcasts, right in the interface is a place to leave a star rating and review for others to consider. Academia is slow to accept media that are not books as worthy of review. In 1991, The American Historical Review (AHR) launched a film review section, which set off a heated debate about the merit of considering historical films (including documentaries) alongside what critics characterized as “scholarship.” In a letter to the journal, Thomas Sowell cried, “[The Today Show film critic] Gene Shalit does a much better job and without the pomposity.” However, more voices lent their support to this new direction and praised the AHR for creating a space for the evaluation of visual texts and visual culture. The most compelling defense came from Daniel J. Walkowitz from New York University, who published books and articles but also produced and directed films, when he replied, “[a]s both an AHR author and a filmmaker myself, I think it only appropriate that the journal evaluate all historical production.”

Like Walkowitz, I find myself at the nexus of scholarly reviews and new forms of historical production. When I came to the University of Central Florida in 2003 and was working toward publishing my first articles and books, I soon discovered podcasts as a distinct medium. Unlike film, podcasts do not require a studio or any training one could not learn on one’s own. What piqued my interest was the question of whether a podcast could be a medium of scholarship, used for the production of new knowledge.

Eventually I worked with a group of graduate students to test this theory. From 2012-2015 we
produced *A History of Central Florida Podcast*. This podcast took the BBC’s famous *A History of the World in 100 Objects* as a model, and through the paradigm of global history and material culture, interpreted objects found in museums throughout central Florida. This became an overview of human civilization in central Florida starting in 6,000 BCE through contemporary times. Additionally, it was a snapshot of everyday life, as the objects selected told a social history. Once we finished the project and disseminated it on iTunes, YouTube, and other places, I reached out to the *AHR, The Journal of American History*, and *The Public Historian* to request that they review the podcast as a media project. Following up on emails and requests took four years, with two of the reviews finally published in 2019.

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What I learned was that the roadblock to a podcast review in those years was book (or media) review editors of print journals wrapping their heads around how to assign a reviewer and then what the review might look like. These journals had by this time reviewed media projects—mostly website-based digital projects, and years earlier, digital projects in the form of floppy disks and CD-ROMs—so this was not wholly new territory. One review editor communicated with me that he could not find a reviewer to commit to reviewing the project because reviewers were unfamiliar with the podcast form.

In hindsight, I know how Walkowitz felt back in 1991. In all the pages of *The Journal of American History* and *The Public Historian*, only a few podcast reviews are featured. Siobhan McMenemy, Senior Editor at Wilfrid Laurier University Press executed the most comprehensive podcast review project to date. [Siobhan is contributing a Feeding the Elephant post on scholarly podcasting later this year. –ed.] She created an open peer review process to review the podcast *Secret Feminist Agenda*, hosted by academic and podcaster Hannah McGregor. McMenemy’s reviewing system is a model for reviewing podcasts and other digital projects that are episodic and whose content might sprawl across many seasons or be non-linear in nature. In the same way that academic journals adopted the traditional book review from centuries-old practices of reviewing, the open peer review process might be something to consider. It is like an academic *Rotten Tomatoes* or *Metacritic*—the opportunity for many voices to comment and consider an original work, contextualize it publicly, and achieve what several book reviews do across several journals.

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dissemination that might help to advance the form in the future.

If other academic departments are like my home department, then we are a long way from acknowledging that original scholarship can exist in digital and other media formats. While we may have accepted the academic film review, I am sure filmmakers do not get promotion and tenure based on a film, except in a film, cinema, or communications department. The first step in bringing about a transformation is with the academic review. It is not as easy as writing a book review with the word “podcast” substituted for the word “book” or “monograph.” It took centuries for the book review as an academic practice with professional standards and rules to finally emerge. Podcast reviews require a different approach from the traditional review, because they raise issues related to listenability, sound design, production, and dissemination that might help to advance the form in the future.

Based on my own experience as a historian and podcast producer and inspired by Siobhan McMenemy, I have launched a podcast reviews program with these things in mind on H-Podcast, a scholarly network about podcasts and podcasting on H-Net. Collectively, the editorial board created a set of specific podcast review guidelines that ask reviewers to consider production practices alongside the podcast’s content within the text of the review. Such considerations of form or aesthetics are important to reviewing digital projects because of the importance of usability to born-digital projects. The online journal Reviews in Digital Humanities created similar review guidelines that consider how to think about the characteristics of a digital project beyond the pure content or interpretation of the subject. Podcasts are one form of the born-digital project, and in many cases have robust websites that accompany episodes and should be reviewed in companion with the podcast itself as part of the larger project. We hope to start publishing our first reviews by the end of 2020. The review is essential to how our scholarly products get evaluated and appreciated. If new modes of scholarly production are to be integrated into the academy, they will only do so first through the academic reviews process.


7. John Budd, “Book Reviewing Practices of Journals in the Humanities,” *Scholarly Publishing* 13, no. 4 (July:1982): 363–371. This article is based on a questionnaire given to book review editors about their standards and processes for publishing a book review mostly in literature and MLA-affiliated journals. Standards on publishing unsolicited reviews, length of review, and whether there was a vetting process in selecting reviewers varied. Many of the practices mentioned are now discouraged and more professional standards have become the norm.

*Robert Cassanello* is a social historian interested in digital public history. He authored the book *To Render Invisible: Jim Crow and Public Life in New South Jacksonville*. He has also produced numerous media projects such as the films, *The Committee*, *Filthy Dreamers* and *Marching Forward* with Dr. Lisa Mills. Additionally, he produced the podcasts *A History of Central Florida Podcast*, *H-Net’s The Art of the Review* and *The Florida Constitutions Podcast*.

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